

LEADING THE WAY TO A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE
BLOOMINGTON’S LONG HISTORY OF STEWARDSHIP

By Mayor Gene Winstead

AS TEMPERATURES ROSE ACROSS THE globe, glaciers that once loomed large across Minnesota receded at the end of the last major Ice Age 12,000 years ago. During the Medieval period, warming reached a point across the northern hemisphere at which grapes were grown in southern Britain and the Vikings sailed ice-free seas to colonize parts of Greenland. The Little Ice Age followed, lasting from the late-1200s to the mid-1800s, apparently caused by changing solar patterns and more robust volcanic activity. Only in the past few decades have European temperatures returned to ranges found in the 1200s.

For most of human existence, those not privileged to live in more tropical climates where energy needs could be satisfied from the sun have struggled to stay alive from day to day. People depended on less direct solar energy via carbon-based fuels, such as wood and coal, to prepare food and ward off the cold.

A shift to fossil fuels

In the developed world, transformation in the standard of living began with the industrial revolution that moved away from products produced by human energy to mass-produced goods and services. That transformation made today’s information revolution possible, fueled by vastly increased use of non-human energy. Early hydro-power use, which helped mechanize the textile industry, and the renewable energy from wood were outstripped by fossil fuels that included coal, then oil and eventually natural gas. This carbon-based combustion gives off byproducts that vent into the environment and accumulate at higher levels of the stratosphere, creating a blanket that traps heat in the lower parts of the atmosphere.

Changing local weather patterns, an increase in catastrophic storms and spiking energy prices sparked a change in public attitudes, including concern with traditional living arrangements. Solutions range from more trees and green space to alternative fuel use and energy sources with fewer atmospherically endangering byproducts. While appealing, not all proposed solutions will lead to decreased carbon and other emissions that should, in turn, reduce the amount of global heating.

Environmental consciousness, energy conservation and sustainable objectives are not new to Bloomington.

Home to Native Americans who lived on what they gathered from nature, the community yielded to the plow and farming in the mid-1800s. By the mid-1900s, Bloomington became a traditional post-World War II suburb, but remembered and treasured its roots and was a good steward of its resources.

Protecting natural resources

Early efforts preserved one-third of the community as parks and open space, protecting important, often fragile, rivers, bluffs, lakes, ponds and wetlands from development. While 20 percent of this protected area was developed as activity-based parks, 80 percent was preserved as open space enjoyed not only by residents, employees and visitors – but also by wildlife – deer, fox, turkey, pheasant, birds and, more recently, bald eagles.

With ongoing efforts to preserve and protect our natural resources, the City:

- Converted manicured turf to swathes of natural prairie, a landscape similar to 150 years ago.
- Employed well-trained forestry professionals; planted new trees throughout the city for more than 25 years; encouraged tree planting on residential properties with an annual tree sale and, as a result, received a “Tree City” designation for the last 20 years.
- Developed a comprehensive storm water quality improvement program.
- Upgraded the storm water system to improve capacity and water quality.
- Completed a comprehensive water body and wetlands study that resulted in a wetland buffering program.
- Required retailers selling fertilizer to offer phosphorus-free products.
- Increased street sweeping to reduce runoff into water bodies.

A sustainable form of living

A sustainable future is not only about green spaces, but the carbon-based energy used to support our lifestyle. Greater distances – between our homes, jobs, shopping and leisure activities – increase energy use. Open spaces that are not in close proximity to users push development farther out, contributing to less energy-efficient urban sprawl. The most sustainable form of living is a mixture of land uses that allows people to live, work and recreate at a density that best supports public transit, particularly electrically powered rail transit.

Striving to be less energy dependent, the City has provided leadership through



strategic planning, land use and financial capability, working for the past few decades to maximize development in proximity to major transportation facilities. Bloomington took advantage of Minnesota’s first rail transit in 50 years to drive higher-density, mixed-use projects such as Bloomington Central Station. The City is currently developing an alternative transportation plan for expanding non-motorized transportation. *See below.*

City’s long-time stewardship

The City represents 2 - 3 percent of the community’s total energy usage. Our longtime stewardship led to increased service and energy efficiency that included:

- Replacing major facilities with more energy-efficient buildings.
- Using a bio-diesel blend as 100 percent of our total diesel consumption.
- Purchasing vehicles that use E-85.
- Looking at purchasing hybrid vehicles to determine the economics of their use.

Our past and present efforts in these areas provide a foundation of leadership toward sustainability to create a brighter future. Our strategic planning framework, Imagine Bloomington 2025, will enable us to weave additional, sustainable objectives into our key strategic areas including: City services; education, employment and community; housing; parks, recreation and open space; people and culture; and transportation. Bloomington already gathered the low-hanging fruit that other Cities have only recently begun to pick. While they may look better in measures of progress that reflect these easy gains, Bloomington will continue to lead by example.

For more information, call Randy Quale at 952-563-8877 or visit the City’s Web site at www.ci.bloomington.mn.us, keywords: Alternative transportation. E-mail comments to parksrec@ci.bloomington.mn.us.

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ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING
DEVELOPING A NETWORK TO SUSTAINABILITY

BLOOMINGTON IS CURRENTLY undertaking an Alternative Transportation Plan that will encourage alternative commuting, reduce motorized traffic and provide recreational and physical fitness opportunities. Alternative transportation includes walking, bicycling, personal

transportation assistance devices, rollerblading and mass transit such as light rail and bus. Public input will be solicited through a citizen task force, open houses, focus groups, e-mail and written comments, and an online survey. A draft of the plan will be reviewed at an open house this fall.